SOME TECHNIQUES FOR COLLECTIVE WORKING

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Some techniques for collective working

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FOREWORD

This publication is primarily intended for development workers, consultants, trainers and others concerned with providing training materials for cooperatives, collectives, teams, community and voluntary organisations, and other democratically run groups and organisations; but individuals and groups from such organisations may also find it of interest.

In conventional organisations, the coordination of people and activities is usually achieved via an essentially 'top-down' flow of instructions. In democratically run groups and teams, particularly smaller ones, this is largely replaced by face-to-face discussions and negotiations amongst members. As Section 1 illustrates, face-to-face groups can be very constructive, or very destructive. Individuals therefore require a larger than average level of skill at working constructively in such groups.

This paper collects together 25 techniques, 7 checklists, and a couple of exercises selected and adapted from the large number of published activities (see Section 7) that various people have designed to help various aspects of group work. Though most of these activities are well known, they were originally designed for conventional, rather than democratically run organisations, so before using any of them, consider carefully whether they are likely to suit the particular situation and personalities involved. All of these techniques depend for their success on a basic climate of goodwill and trust, and on a setting in which constructive progress is in principle possible.

Though the techniques selected do not in general depend on the presence of a skilled facilitator, this may be necessary in particularly difficult conditions - a role that could be taken either by a 'neutral' member of the organisation who had appropriate skills, or by an outsider such as a development worker or an external consultant. Skilled facilitators clearly require competences well beyond those described in this paper, including: a well-developed sensitivity to the personal concerns and anxieties of individuals, and to the many different kinds of unspoken overtones that will be present in any group; an ability to support, serve, and empower the group without dominating or directing it; and a well developed ability to distinguish between her or his own views, values and perceptions and those of group members, and give priority to the latter.
1. THE CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE ASPECTS OF GROUPS.

When McGregor wrote the notes which I have adapted below from his book: "The Human Side of Enterprise" he was thinking of fairly autonomous face-to-face groups in conventional organisations - such as project teams, or decision-making committees. But if you read down his description, I think you will find that it rings lots of bells for democratically run groups and organisations as well. Most groups are somewhere in between the rosy description of the "constructive group" in Checklist 1 below and the black comedy of the "destructive group" in Checklist 2 - though, sadly, really bad groups are a lot commoner than really good ones. "Synergy" means "all parts working well together"; I have borrowed the term "emotional plague" from another writer, because it seemed apt!

Checklist 1: The constructive group - synergy at work.

1. The "atmosphere" tends to be informal, comfortable, relaxed. People are involved and interested. There are no signs of boredom.

2. There is a lot of discussion. Virtually everyone participates. If the discussion gets off the subject, someone will bring it back quickly.

3. The objectives are well understood and accepted by members, who have discussed them, formulated them, and now feel committed to them.

4. The members listen to each other! The discussion does not have the quality of jumping from one idea to another unrelated one. People are not afraid of trying out odd or extreme ideas - every idea is given a hearing.

5. There is disagreement. The group is comfortable with this, accepts conflict, and does not have to keep everything on a plane of sweetness and light. Individuals who disagree do not try to dominate the group. Conflicts are carefully examined and the group seeks to resolve them rather than to dominate or be dominated by, the dissenter. The group can live with unresolvable disagreements without permitting them to block its efforts. For instance, essential action may still be taken, but with open caution and recognition that it may be subject to later reconsideration.

6. Most decisions are reached by a kind of consensus - everybody is in general agreement and willing to go along. However, there is no false consensus - significant opposition is not concealed. Formal voting is seldom used; simple numerical majority is not seen as a proper basis for action.

7. Criticism is frequent, frank, relatively comfortable, and free of personal attacks. It has a constructive flavour, oriented towards removing an obstacle that faces the group and prevents it from getting the job done.

8. People are free in expressing their feelings as well as their ideas both on the problem and on the group's operation.

9. When action is taken, clear assignments are made and accepted.

10. The leadership of the group shifts from time to time, depending on the circumstances. At different times different members are in the best position to act as resources for the group and they are put in temporary leadership roles while being used in this way.

11. The group is selfconscious about its own operations. Frequently, it will stop to examine how well it is doing or what may be interfering with its operation, whether this is procedural or personal. Whatever it is, it gets open discussion until a solution is found.
Checklist 2: The destructive group - Keep clear, Emotional Plague at work!

1. An 'atmosphere' of indifference and boredom (people whispering to each other, individuals who are obviously not involved, etc) or tension (stiffness, formality, undercurrents of hostility, etc.); the group is not genuinely involved in its task.

2. A few people tend to dominate the discussion. Often their contributions are way off the point. Little is done by anyone to keep the group clearly on the track.

3. Though the objectives may have been stated by the chairman initially, there is no evidence that the group either understands or accepts them. Private and personal objectives often seem to be in conflict with each other and with the group's task.

4. People do not really listen to each other. The discussion does not have a coherent thread, and ideas are often ignored and overridden. Speeches are to impress rather than for relevance to the task at hand. Members tend to be extremely careful about what they say for fear of the personal judgements that might be made about them; they avoid expressing ideas or feelings that might be criticised or dismissed as silly.

5. Disagreements are not dealt with effectively. Insecure leaders may suppress the conflict; there may be open warfare between factions; votes won by small margins may leave large dissatisfied minorities; aggressive minorities may be so disruptive that the majority gives way.

6. Actions are often taken prematurely before the real issues are either examined or resolved. There will be much grousing after the meeting by people who disliked the decision but failed to speak up about it. Formal voting is often used, even though the minority remains resentful and uncommitted to the decision.

7. Where criticism occurs it is often a direct or partially concealed personal attack, and is often destructive.

8. Personal feelings are concealed. There often seem to be "hidden agendas" at work, and people pussyfoot around uncomfortable issues.

9. When decisions are made, it may not be clear what each person is to do, or whether they are prepared to do it.

10. The leadership is jealously guarded by the chairperson, whether weak or strong, capable or not.

11. The group is not prepared to consider its own deficiencies - at least during the meeting!

Whether your group runs with careful, caring synergy, or runs like a black comedy, depends on lots of things - a discussion of imminent bankruptcy is always going to be more emotional and heated than a discussion of tomorrow's production schedule! But one of the most important components is always you and your own skills in knowing clearly what you are trying to do, listening carefully, giving sensitive but responsible feedback, supporting where needed, and enjoying and valuing not only your own unique differences, but also those of others.

2. ON EVERYONE HAVING THEIR SAY, BEING LISTENED TO PROPERLY, AND MAKING SPACE FOR ONE ANOTHER.

The way a democratically run organisation operates should make collective decision-making possible in principle. But making something possible in principle is not the same as actually getting it to happen properly in practice.
For instance:

- A big meeting organised so that only one person can talk at once is not a good way to let even 20 people have their say, far less 50, 100, 200 etc.

- While some people are very confident (even too confident!) about standing up in front of everyone and saying what they have to say, most of us find that pretty difficult; we need a lot of practice to even begin to feel at ease with it - and even then we need a lot of support. Most of us can talk and think much better in smaller, more intimate groupings.

- *Listening* to other people in a careful, and understanding way is at least as difficult as speaking out yourself - it is so easy to get bored or angry, or frustrated, or to latch onto irritating mannerisms, or to feel offended, or under attack. If that happens, you won't really hear the content of what the other person is trying to say, only the emotional message that you picked up.

- And the whole business seems to be circular - if people feel that no-one is listening properly, they may give up trying to say anything at all, or don't say it so well, so the others pay even less attention, and everything gets worse and worse. And it works the other way round too - it is much, much, easier to talk in a lively and open way when you know someone is really listening, and it is much easier to really listen when someone else is really talking.

However if an organisation is to have a substantial element of real collective decision-making, rather than simply set up a very traditional-looking structure of managers and representatives, the problem of letting a lot of people have their say and exert their influence, without spending most of the working day in an interminable series of large meetings, is a very difficult one. Described below are a range of techniques that can go some way to meeting the problem. Obviously they can be varied and adapted in many ways. But the general principles should be clear enough.

**Technique 1: The ‘ideas slip’ method.**

In any group discussion, two major processes are at work:

a) mutual stimulation as one person's ideas trigger off ideas in another.

b) mutual inhibition as group pressures direct the discussion in one way rather than another, and as the less outspoken members lose out to the more vocal members.

A very simple way to minimise the effects of mutual inhibitions is to issue everyone with a handful of small slips ("Post-it" pads can be quite good). Then whenever a key item comes up for discussion, always start off by getting everyone to write down their own ideas privately on the slips, collect them in, sort them into related groups, and display them anonymously. If there are a large number of people in the meeting, you may need to summarise them. The important features are:

a) that people express their views privately, before wider discussion,

b) that contributions are anonymous, so that no-one feels inhibited,

c) that all contributions are fed back to everyone,

d) that the procedure is used regularly so that people are used to it and expect it,

e) and that it is always used in a fair and open way.
Technique 2: The Quaker meeting.

This is a quickfire approach meant for meetings of, say, forty or more people. If numbers are much smaller than that it becomes a less formal brainstorming session (see Techniques 17 & 18). It is used to collect large number of ideas, suggestions, or approaches to a problem or topic. It needs one person to act as organiser, and a panel of, say, 3 or 4 people with pen and paper to record all the contributions on large sheets of paper stuck up on the wall.

The organiser explains the rules:

- The Quaker meeting will take 15 minutes only.
- As any thought, suggestions, or reaction occurs to someone, they speak out to the entire group, but must limit what they say to 10 or 15 words only so that as many as possible can speak.
- Don’t interrupt one another, but be ready to inject what you want to say quickly.
- Feel free to suggest even the wildest and most far-out suggestions - they may trigger other, more practical, ones from other people.
- The note-takers will record every reaction, even jokes and bizarre ideas, but their will be no discussion at all of individual ideas at this point.

The organiser then reminds the meeting of the topic - perhaps writing it on a black-board, and starts the 15 minutes going. The note-takers may need to work out some staggered system - e.g. note-taker No.1 records the 1st, 4th, 7th etc. reactions, while No.2 records the 2nd, 5th, 8th and so on and No.3 records the 3rd, 6th, 9th and so on.

It might be best for the Quaker meeting to happen just before a natural break - lunch, end of the day, etc. So that if a lot of ideas are produced, you have time to process them - e.g. mimeographing the lists for sub-groups or committees, or classifying the items in some way, so that it is easier to discuss them. It is also a good idea to clearly separate the initial period described above when all sorts of ideas are encouraged in a very uncritical way, and later discussions when ideas will be looked at more critically.

Technique 3: The Information Fair.

This method was originally devised for dealing with democratic communication in very large bodies of several hundred people, but it could work quite well for totals of, say, 50 people. It takes quite a lot of advance preparation, and it is of most use for discussing big, all-embracing, issues - for instance one use of it was to provide a way for the planners to find out the wishes of the inhabitants of a town suburb that was due for redevelopment. In a group or organisation, it could be used to discuss major changes of direction, overall strategies, etc.

1. Long before the meeting you will need lots of preliminary discussions, to identify a number of major themes, or sub-problems, within the overall problem. Since you will, in effect, end up with one group of 10 or 20 people per theme, the number of themes you want will be related to the total size of the organisation - e.g. if you have a total of 50 people, you want no more than about 5 themes. The careful choice of themes is critical.

2. The fair itself consists of a collection of booths - one for each theme. Each booth as display boards indicating the theme, giving basic information about it, having spare space for reactions, votes, etc. It also has chairs, and someone to run the booth.

3. Everyone attending the fair can wander around, look at all booths, and choose the one that interests them most. You can either allow people to circulate continuously, or
you could have a bell every hour or so and encourage people not to move except at that point.

4. The person who runs the booth convenes a discussion amongst those who attend the booth, in such a way that the observations of those who attend are accumulated on the display, so that it does not matter too much if people arrive and depart throughout the day. For instance:

- By getting them to write their comments on cards (in bold writing - use thick felt-tipped pens) which can then be pinned on the stands and grouped or regrouped as appropriate.

- By various voting methods, such as getting people to tick which items on a displayed list seem most important (so that the overall pattern of ticks shows the overall preferences of the group) or to mark where they judge something to be on a continuous scale (e.g. "mark how often you do such and such" on a scale running from "never" to "frequently") and so on.

By the end of the Fair, not only will everyone involved have a much clearer picture of the issues, and of other people's views, but the information recorded in the booths provides an important public record of suggestions, views, and judgements.

Technique 4: Quality Circles.

This is one of the informal ways in which small groups can work in a democratic way away from the context of big meetings. Though the method was devised in conventional Japanese organisations, it could easily be adapted for use in smaller organisations. Essentially the group of people who operate any particular process get together regularly to talk about it, and how they work with it, to see if there are any ways in which they could do it better, or more conveniently. If they agree, they either make the change themselves, or if it has wider implications, they put it forward for discussion in the appropriate forum. Quite apart from the process improvements that result, it helps the people who work on it to feel much more of a team, and it is a social as well as a practical, forum.

It is very important that the ideas generated by the Quality Circle are taken seriously and that the Circle has some incentive to do its job well. In conventional organisations this would mean that ideas from the Circle are presented by Circle members to appropriate levels of management, resources are available to try the ideas out, and the Circle gets bonuses or perks if the idea works. This approach would need to be modified for use in a democratic context, but the principle still applies - if the Circle's ideas are not taken seriously or their efforts are not acknowledged, it will soon degenerate.

Technique 5. Breaking a meeting up into very small groups - two or three people.

In a big meeting of, say, 25 people if you only let one person talk at a time, then on average each person talks 4% of the time, and listens for 96%. In practice it is usually even worse than that, because a few people talk a lot, and a lot of people say nothing at all. Not surprisingly people often feel bored and frustrated by meetings like that. However if you divide up into pairs, each person can talk 50% of the time, and listen 50%, and as a result people tend to feel much more involved, and even the quietest of people contribute. Breaking a big meeting up into twos or threes like this is particularly useful for:

- Giving everyone a chance to talk through some new topic or issue so that they can begin to put their thoughts and feelings about it into words. When you all come
together again in the full meeting, people will then be able to talk more clearly and fluently about it, and they are more likely to have thought more thoroughly about it.

- Getting newcomers and less assertive members of the coop involved more quickly, making sure that their views are brought out, and getting them used to contributing.
- Preventing very assertive members of the coop from dominating the meeting.
- It is usually much easier to explore differences of opinion in small groups of 2 or 3 than in a full meeting. Often the differences will be resolved very creatively within the small group. But even if they are not, at least they are contained within a personal face-to-face relationship.

Of course, people will often get together spontaneously in little groups during teabreaks, etc, but many people do not naturally fall into such patterns, and even when they do, they may not work in a useful way - the teabreak chat is as likely to be about football or families as about work-related topics.

So make a definite decision to form twos or threes, agree on how they are to work, and agree how they are to be formed (e.g. similar or dissimilar people, people who know one another or people who don't, same or different area of skill or level of expertise, old hands/newcomers, etc. etc.). For instance, if you want to emphasise differences, people should pair off in unlike pairs. If you want to emphasise support and sharing, people should pair off into like pairs. If you want to maximise support for newcomers, pair off in veteran/newcomer combinations, and so on.

No doubt many of twos and threes will "bend" these agreements in various ways, but at least there is a basic structure to act as a reference point. Technique 6 is one possible way of working once the pairs are formed.

Of course, the big disadvantage of breaking up into very small groups is that often a collective decision by the whole group is needed, or at least a collective information sharing, so that the key points of the pair discussion will need to be fed back to the full meeting. There are various possible ways of doing this:

- One member of each pair agrees to act as the spokesperson for that pair; obviously this gets very tedious if there are lots of pairs or trios.
- You could write down key points for each pair on a piece of paper and pin them on the wall so that everyone could read them, or hand them into the organiser of the meeting to summarise and redistribute later on.
- Or pairs of pairs could come together into fours to pool their ideas - and pairs of fours could then do the same - so by the time you get to the full meeting, most of the information has been collated together.
- Of course if the purpose of the pairs or trios is simply to develop people's awareness and thinking about some issue, prior to some wider discussion, you do not really need to collate it at all - though a "pairs of pairs" stage might still be useful to give everyone a wider set of perspectives.

Technique 6: Structured pair discussion.

This technique is one way of working once you are in your "pair". What you are trying to tap are the extended trains of thought that you get when you are thinking about some topic privately on your own, only this time you are actually speaking the words out loud, and someone is listening. So the idea is for one person to talk in an unstructured way for a sustained period, while the other listens attentively and neutrally without interrupting in any
way - the listener must attend carefully, but must not nod agreement, look puzzled, indicate disagreement, or attempt to smooth over anxieties or silences or confusions. In normal conversation listeners are either attentive and over-supportive, or neutral but bored, so being attentive and neutral is definitely not easy. This may sound a very peculiar way of doing things and it can seem very uncomfortable at first, but it can work very well, both sides can learn a great deal from it, and it is completely fair in allowing everyone exactly the same time.

Once you have divided into pairs (or threes, in which case there are two listeners), you work like this:

- Agree on the topic, who will talk first, and on how long each round will be - two to three minutes is usually enough if you are new to this method, though later you may want to increase it to 10 minutes, or even more.

- You then take it in turns. In the first round, A talks and B listens. In the next round B talks and A listens, and so on. If you are working in threes, you could just have two listeners, or you could work with three rather than two roles - talker, listener, and observer. The observer would sit a little further away so as to be out of the direct line of sight of the others, but able to hear, and could note how well the listener listened, and perhaps take notes of the key points as they came up. Its a good idea to start each round by the listener reminding the talker of the topic; and end it by the talker thanking the listener. The timing should be exact, and its quite alright for the round to stop in mid-sentence. Either the meeting organiser keeps the time for everybody, or the listener (or observer) watches the time if the pair are working on their own.

Technique 7: Buddy systems

Another decentralised way of using very small groups is to set up long term "buddy" relationships - so that, for instance, 2 or 3 may work together over a long period, or may agree to meet regularly to talk about how their work is going. Each then tends to see themselves as the guide, mentor, protector, friend or teacher of the other - they learn from one another and they support and encourage one another. Sometimes it is best to aim for pairs of people who know one another or who are very compatible - at other times it may be better to pair up people who do not yet know one another, or who are rather unlike one another. Sometimes it might be best if a more experienced member pairs up with a less experienced one - the experienced one teaches the other the ropes, and the inexperienced one may bring a fresh outlook and ask thought-provoking questions. Or else a less assertive person may gain support by pairing up with a more assertive one. Or where two or three people have rather unstructured jobs, and are a bit unsure about them, they could get together regularly to talk about their plans for the next period of work, look back on how their last set of plans worked out in practice, and help one another to set more sensible goals. Or if you are trying to teach yourself some new topic or skill it can be a very big help to pair up with someone else doing the same - you can plan your work together, discuss difficulties together, nag one another when you feel inclined to drop out, help one another to establish regular patterns of work, share insights, test one another, stimulate one another creatively, and so on. A very important use of buddy systems is that of giving support to help people to implement projects they have agreed to carry out - you use the buddy as a safe person with whom to talk over problems and progress.

Some buddy systems use the structured pair discussion technique as a way of organising each pair's regular meetings - say once a week. Another useful buddy technique is the use of personal contracts.

Technique 8: Personal Contracts

Any 'pair' can use this technique, but it is particularly helpful for a long-term pair such as a 'buddy' partnership. Suppose person A has always found it difficult to speak out in meetings
and wants to do something about it. A might make an agreement with a partner B that A would really try to pluck up courage to speak out at the next meeting, provided that B would agree to do everything possible to help. For instance B might give a lot of moral support before the meeting, might warn the convener of the meeting, might try to make a space for A in the discussion and afterwards might reassure and congratulate him. This kind of contract between the two obviously goes a bit beyond B just realising that A has difficulties in meetings and therefore giving a little friendly moral support; in this case A makes a definite agreement to do a definite action at a definite time - the formality of the contract is as important as the support that B gives. This method can be used to help with any goal that normally seems just out of reach because you block on it, and are a bit scared by it, or never quite get round to it, or have never quite pushed yourself that far before, etc.

Obviously:

- It should be a goal that A really wants to achieve - you can’t force contracts on people.
- It should be a goal that A could achieve, with support - success is a big incentive to go further next time, but failure is the reverse - so you want to move by real, but achievable, steps.
- It should be a task for which B really can give support to A. Screwing yourself up to try something, and then being let down by your supporter, is a very demoralising process.
- It should be a definite goal at a definite time and place - not just "do better next time" or "sort that out eventually".

Exercise 1: Not-listening

This is a demonstration of the importance of good listening by giving you the experience of a total lack of listening - though if you have to deal with a lot of people who can’t listen it might also be good practice! If you do try it, always follow it up by a more positive experience such as Exercise 2 below - otherwise it could leave a very sour taste!

1. Divide into pairs (or threes, if you want observers)
2. This exercise needs two roles: the client, and the case worker (see role briefs below). Decide which of each pair is going to be which, and if you are using triads, decide who will observe. The client and the case-worker should spend a few minutes thinking themselves into the role descriptions given below, which depict two people each so wrapped up in their own concerns that they have no intention of listening to what the other has to say.
3. Start enacting the role-play, and go on until you can really feel the frustration. If you have an observer, he or she should note what happens and enforce the "no-listening" rule.
4. All come together again and discuss how you responded to frustration, and what you learned from it. Warning: take special note of the "advice on feedback" given in the next section - the climate created by this exercise is not a good one for telling home truths to particular members of the coop!

Role brief for the client: You have just moved into the city to begin a job with a small local business. On arriving two days ago, you were informed by this company that your position had to be dropped.
You are now unemployed and your funds are running out. To make matters worse your youngest child awoke this morning with a temperature of 103 degrees. You called the company again, but all they could suggest was that you contact the local Social Services Dept.

You are have done this, and about to talk to a case-worker to get help. You are quite upset, and you feel you have no time to waste in small talk. You must make the case-worker understand the seriousness of your situation. You feel that the case-worker's sole concern should be to get you the help you need immediately.

**Role brief for the case-worker:** You were taken on as a reception aide as part of the Social Services Department's attempt to streamline its processing of clients, in order to adapt to cutbacks in the funding to the Social Services. You have been at your job now two months. Your job is to see new clients, inform them about the services that the Department can offer so that they are in a better position to be helped, and decide which part of the Department to refer them to. Since all the workers are heavily overloaded, you have worked out your own ways of helping some of the clients' minor problems.

One of the biggest problems you face in your job is that most of the people you try to help have preconceived notions about what you should do for them, and you resent them making demands rather than asking you for your help and advice, particularly when they come from outside the area that the Department is meant to serve. After all, you have been trained as a reception aide.

Therefore, at the beginning of any interview, you make sure that each knows firstly that you are in a position to know what is the best for helping him and secondly exactly what the various services of the Social Services Department are.

**Exercise 2: Listening, talking, communicating**

This is a straightforward exercise in communication and listening.

1. Divide into small groups (say 4 to 5 each) by choosing people you do not know very well and/or who you believe have somewhat different views of the world than you.

2. Each group selects a fairly controversial topic, such as - women/men as managers, compulsory religious education, pros and cons of the profit motive, etc. etc.

3. The groups discuss their topics for 20-30 minutes while trying to produce a single, agreed recommendation related to their topic.

4. At the end, each group member tries to summarise the viewpoint of each other member on a separate sheet of paper (i.e. one sheet per group member) and then gives the sheet to the person it refers to to score it for accuracy and completeness.

5. All groups come together to discuss the skills needed for presenting an argument, for listening, and for reproducing an argument.

6. Repeat the exercise with another topic to let people practice what they have learned in the feedback and discussion.

**3. CRITICISM AND FEEDBACK**

Good feedback is essential for any self-regulating organisation. You learn a lot more from being told what you have done wrong, than from being told what you've done right (though that's very important too). But being told what you have done wrong feels very uncomfortable, because we are used to being clobbered for our mistakes. So giving feedback is a delicate but very important business.
Checklist 3: General guidelines on giving feedback to someone else.

- Give feedback to help the other person, not to satisfy yourself:
  - You do not have a right to tell people what you think of them (though it's also true that they do not have a right to refuse all feedback when they are doing things that hurt you).
  - The best time to give feedback is when someone has asked for it.
  - There are times when people can only cope with gentle feedback, and times when they can cope with tougher feedback - make sure you know which is which.
  - If in doubt ask if they want it, and ask what kind of feedback they want.

- Timeliness:
  Give feedback soon after the event it relates to, provided that the recipient has the time and resources to assimilate it.
  - Don't give feedback when it is so late that the event has been forgotten, or when it is too late to do anything about it.
  - Don't give feedback when the recipient doesn't have time to assimilate it, and adjust to it.
  - Don't give critical feedback at a time when the recipient needs all the resources they have to deal with something else (e.g. just before a difficult interview).

- Talk about what you actually observed or felt and be specific about it - e.g. "when you did such and such just now, it affected me in such and such a way":
  - Don't try to interpret underlying motives, don't generalise, and don't evaluate. This means avoiding statements like: "I think you are trying to undermine the meeting", "you always seem to be off beam", "I think that what you did then was ill-conceived".

- Check with the person you are giving feedback to that your understanding of what they did was correct, and that they have understood your comments correctly; anxieties often lead to misunderstandings and vice versa. It also helps to check these out with third parties: did they react in the same way?

- Aim your comments at things that they can change, e.g.:
  - Don't criticise a beginner for not being an expert
  - Don't criticise someone who is grossly overloaded for not doing more.

- Talk directly to the person, not indirectly about them. Say: "John, I didn't like you doing x". Don't say, "People seem to have been unhappy about you doing x". The direct approach treats them as a person, not an object, and leaves open the possibility of them responding to you if they want to.
Technique 9: Renegotiating individual roles

Particularly in a new coop, there will often be times when individuals find that what they think they are supposed to be doing, and what other people think they are supposed to be doing, do not agree. This technique is to help members of a team to bring these differences to the surface and work out a more generally accepted version.

It works best with a group of less than 12, who work together regularly, and is likely to take at least three hours. It is probably best to have one person to organise it.

1. Each person spends about 20 minutes privately writing down notes about his or her job:
   a) As it was taught to them - i.e. the "proper" way to do it.
   b) What other people seem to think the person should be doing, or be responsible for.
   c) What the person is willing to do.
   d) What the person actually does.

It would help to write these headings on a black-board so that everyone can see as they write.

2. The organiser calls for someone to volunteer to clarify his or her work role.

3. The rest of the group spend 10 minutes making notes on their understanding of this person’s responsibilities. Meanwhile the organiser briefs the volunteer on what is to come.

4. When the rest of the group are ready, the volunteer reads out and clarifies the notes that he or she wrote in Step 1(b) - "what other people seem to think he or she should be doing". The organiser writes the key points on the board; the others may only ask questions if they need to clarify something.

5. The volunteer then questions the other team members on their actual expectations, and writes these on the board. The organiser says nothing at this point, except to keep the volunteer listening accurately and non-defensively.

6. The organiser then leads a discussion of the confirmed and misperceived expectations.

7. The volunteer now reads out his notes from step 1 (a): "How he or she was taught the job". Again others can only ask questions for purpose of clarification.

8. The organiser then leads a discussion to re-negotiate a new job contract between the volunteer and the rest of the team.

9. Steps 2 - 8 are repeated for each other team member. This whole process could be usefully repeated every so often within the life of the team.

Technique 10: Feedback between different groups within the Organisation.

Any organisation with more than a tiny handful of members will tend to form separate sub-groups that see themselves as different in various ways from one another, and tend to get somewhat cut off from one another. Just as individuals often have misconceptions about how others see them, so do such groups. This exercise is a simple way of helping sub-groups like this to give feed-back to one another.
1. Get two sub-groups, each of which routinely works together and thinks of themselves as a distinct group or team.

2. Separate the two groups so that each group can talk privately.

3. Each group spends 45 minutes preparing a list of twenty-four adjectives - twelve positive and twelve negative - that best describe the other group. They choose a spokesperson, who records the adjectives on a board or a big sheet of paper.

4. The two groups then come together again, and the two spokespersons display their lists, read them through, and sum up their position by drawing attention to key words.

5. Everyone considers this in silence for two minutes. This is to make sure that everybody actually takes in the information on the lists, rather than immediately jumping into a defensive mode.

6. Participants divide into discussion groups of four each - two people from each group. Each discussion group then takes about 45 minutes to discuss how people see each other.

7. Everyone spends ten minutes writing on a sheet of paper what he or she has learned from the exercise. The sheets, which remain anonymous, are collected in and circulated round the full group.

8. The two groups should either agree to take some specific positive action, or agree to meet again later to do so.

**Technique 11: Feedback from outside the organisation.**

It can be very useful to know how you are seen by outsiders - other coops, voluntary organisations, community businesses, development agencies, suppliers, purchasers, etc, etc - and it is obviously useful to try to build up better links with such bodies. This exercise would be one way to help this process.

1. Well before the meeting, decide which outside bodies or people you wish to invite, and how you want them to see this exercise. You must then invite the relevant people in a formal "organisation-to-organisation" way, explaining clearly that the meeting will last a couple of hours, and its aim is to help the organisation become more effective, and to see how best to improve relations with the outside bodies. Remember that all the outside representatives will also be meeting one another - so check that this is not likely to cause problems!

2. The meeting should be chaired by someone in the organisation who will be respected by the outsiders, and who has the ability to help members of the organisation to listen carefully to the feedback and not become defensive. A member of the organisation should be appointed to take notes on blackboards or large sheets of paper, so that everyone can see them. The outside representatives are encouraged to be open and specific in their feedback, and are assured once again that the purpose of meeting is to help the organisation become more effective.

3. This is followed by a general discussion about what to do with the information acquired, how best to follow it up, and how to follow it through with the invited representatives. Once again, the chairman must have the skill to help members focus on what to do with the information, rather than on trying to respond to it with explanations, objections, justifications, etc.

4. After the external representatives have left, the chairman asks the members to give him or her some feedback on the conduct of the meeting.
4. ARE YOUR DIFFERENCES A SOURCE OF INSIGHT AND ENERGY, OR ARE YOUR CONFLICTS DESTROYING YOU?

Setting up a small organisation, and trying to work democratically, are inevitably going to be challenging activities that are going to stretch your members. Conflicting views and interests are therefore going to be a regular fact of life.

However these differences amongst you can also be one of your most important assets because they ensure a very rich source of skills, ideas, pieces of information, viewpoints, etc. and they challenge each of you to learn and to broaden and deepen your understanding. A certain amount of good-humoured sparring between different parties can also be a useful source of vitality - it keeps people on their toes!

But sometimes the differences become polarised and strongly loaded emotionally, and sometimes they become entrenched in different splinter groups. This can lead to a lot of internal politics, back biting, manipulative manoeuvering, sabotage, and so on. The "Emotional Plague" that results can be very destructive indeed.

So you have a lot to gain if you handle conflict well, and a lot to lose if you don't.

Conflicts often arise when people with incompatible habitual expectations have to cooperate together, so conflict resolution almost always involves "getting out of habitual mental grooves". This is difficult because the brain has evolved so that it normally depends on established habits, expectations, agreed time tables and programmes, and so on. It is very good that it does that, or else human society would be a totally unpredictable, very uncomfortable, place! But when you need new ideas, you have to jump out of the grooves, and that's not so easy. Trying to do it on your own is like trying to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. But if you have a collection of different people with different experiences, outlooks, etc, then differences provide a good resource for provoking your thinking out of its grooves.

BUT - and its a very big but - people will only be creatively open about their differences if and when it feels safe to do so - if the general experience is that sticking your neck out is a risky and unrewarding business, everyone stays low and tries to be inconspicuous - so an atmosphere of reliable trust and safety is crucial.

Checklist 4 below lists different conflict-handling strategies. Techniques 12 - 14 are designed to generate insight into the nature of the conflict. 15 - 18 are designed to generate ideas about possible solutions.

Checklist 4: Approaches to conflict.

If you are dealing with a conflict that looks like a problem, there are several levels at which you could try to deal with it:

1. Ignore it, or pretend to agree when you don’t. This sometimes works, because people do sometimes create pseudo-conflicts - perhaps because they are bored, or to make a point, because they enjoy conflict, or for any number of subtle psychological reasons - and ignoring it may sometimes be the best response. But this kind of controlled neglect should be very different from just burying your head in the sand and hoping that the conflict will go away. You would always be wise to ask yourself why it happened. Even if the immediate conflict is spurious, there is probably a real enough issue somewhere underneath it.

2. Delaying tactics. Distract the participants with something else, start very long drawn out investigations, or impose a cooling off period. There are occasions when buying time like this is really important - e.g. to allow you to finish some urgent project first; or because the conflict is, in its nature, only a short term one that will soon disappear.
under higher priority issues; or because you genuinely need time to analyse it. But trying to fudge the issue and pass the buck on a pressing, real, conflict is likely to end up making it worse.

3. Crude power or authority. If you are in a very strong position, you can use it to enforce one particular solution of your choice. This can happen even in a formally democratic set-up like a co-operative not only from crude psychological pressure and bullying by strong or charismatic individuals, but even from the democratic machinery itself, as when group pressures to conform are too strong, or when particular minorities feel that they will never get enough voting support to have their needs recognised. It can lead to lots of residual bitterness, though not always - there are times when any decision would do, and the only thing that people do not want is dithering indecision. It can also lead to people depending too much on others to do their thinking for them.

4. Solving the conflict - i.e. finding a solution in which each of the apparently conflicting parties ends up fully satisfied. This is likely to be feasible when the conflict was based on a misunderstanding, or on inefficiencies in the system which can be rectified, or when the parties were really in conflict over ways of achieving certain goals, rather than over the goals themselves, and can be helped to find other, non-conflicting, routes to those goals. The danger in this approach is that the kind of practical, tangible conflict it can deal with often has deeper undertones beneath it, and you can easily feel so smug about having found a neat technical solution to the visible problem that you don’t pay enough attention to deeper issues that are festering underneath it.

5. Dissolving the conflict - i.e. changing the whole nature of the issue, so that the old basis of the conflict is completely by-passed. For instance demarcation disputes between operators of two adjacent machines could be dissolved by introducing different machines which have to be operated in completely new ways for which the old demarcations are irrelevant. Once again, smugness is the danger - e.g. if the real reason for the dispute was that the two operators did not like one another, it will not be long before they devise a new set of conflicts!

6. Acceptable compromise. In any conflict there are almost always some issues that present real, permanent, irresolvable differences, such that no amount of ingenuity will allow each side to achieve everything it wants. What you have to do here is:

- Try to make sure that neither side gets landed with things it really cannot accept at all.

- If you can identify some issues that matter more to A than B and others that matter more to B than A, then ingenious horse-trading should allow both sides to gain more than they lose in terms of what they most want.

- Where there is a direct, irresolvable conflict on matters of equal importance to both sides, then you have to look for criteria for how to ‘spread the misery’ in some way that can be agreed to be fair or appropriate.

7. Learning to value it. While some conflicts have to be resolved (e.g. because there aren’t enough resources to follow both routes), many conflicts - even quite deep ones - may have relatively little operational impact. For instance very different right wing and left wing ideologies have both been used to justify the same practical goal of cooperative working. In such cases, it may be much better to regard the conflict as a creative resource, and actually protect it and value it!
Technique 12: Force-field analysis.

This is a simple way of depicting the conflicting forces in any problem. Any decision that you want to change can be thought of as a balance between some forces that are tending to drive towards a solution, and other restraining forces that are holding it back:

You can move it in the direction you want to go either by reducing the resisting forces to less than the driving forces, or increasing the driving forces to more than the resisting forces. But if both sides are reduced or increased equally, nothing will happen.

This very simple model can be used to help you think more clearly about conflict and change when trying to solve problems. The procedure below assumes that the need to analyse the situation has arisen in a meeting of say 6 - 8 people, but the method could of course be used by an individual.

1. Working privately, on your own, identify the problem as you see it, and describe it in writing.
2. Then, still working on your own, list:
   a) those forces or factors in the situation that seem, at the moment, to be driving towards change.
   b) those forces or factors that seem, at the moment, to be restraining change.
3. Underline the 2-3 forces in each direction that seem most important.
4. For each individual force, list ways in which:
   - if it is a restraining force, it could be reduced or eliminated.
   - if it is a driving force it could be enhanced.
5. Devise a possible plan of action by:
   - selecting the most promising ways from Step 4.
   - identifying the resources you could use to help you to implement these.
   - arrange all or some of these ways as a coherent series of steps to fit your overall aims, making sure you know exactly what each step involves, when it is to happen, and how.
6. Come together as a group, share your individual efforts, and formulate a group plan.

**Technique 13: Role plays and role reversals.**

Knowing what to do in theory is not at all the same as having to do it in practice - and the experience of actually doing something often gives you insights you could never have achieved just by thinking about it. That is why actually acting out roles rather than just talking about strategy can be very useful, and forms the basis of all sorts of standard training techniques, ranging for instance from helping people looking for jobs to do better in interviews, to helping American Presidents cope better with electoral confrontations on TV!

The purpose of it is not, of course, to try to be a good actor, but to get feedback about the strong and weak points in your habitual patterns, to get insight into what others in the role play have to cope with, and to practice better ways of working.

A very good way of getting insight into a conflict you are involved in is to try being the opposite role for a while.

Here is one way of working:

1. Two coop members who are in conflict agree to try a role reversal.
2. Agree a specific situation to role play - either on actual past event, or some particular future situation. Make it as specific, concrete, and relevant to the conflict as possible.
3. Set up any theatrical props needed - e.g. a couple of chairs and a table - keep these very simple.
4. Everyone else (say 5-10 people) sits in a wide circle around the role play so that they can see and hear, but don’t get in the way.
5. The two participants make sure that they understand the nature of the situation and their (reversed) roles; check whether either participant wants to set particular limits - e.g. to put certain topics "out of bounds". Make it clear that either participant can stop the role-play at any time.
6. The role-play starts in whatever way feels right to the role-players. As it develops it may well happen that an onlooker feels that a role-player is not making a point that would be appropriate at that time, or is not saying what they really mean, or needs help in some other way. To inject a remark of this sort, stand behind the role-player you want to speak for, put your hand on his or her shoulder, and say what you want to say as if you were the role-player; then return to your seat.
7. Only continue as long as the role-players feel it to be of benefit - don’t go on until they become tired or confused. If possible stop on a strong and constructive note.

After the reverse role-play, the two players should check out from one another whether their reverse interpretations were correct, tell one another about what they have learned from the exercise, see if they can resolve any other differences, and agree how to follow up their resolution. They can ask the observers for feedback or help at any point.

**Technique 14: Role playing on behalf of a group.**

Technique 13 can be adapted for role-plays in which the role-players are not representing individuals, but groups. So in a direct role-play, Player 1 might represent her/his own Group. In a reverse role play, Player 1 would attempt to represent the opposite Group.
The procedure is essentially the same as for Technique 13, though the observers are likely to be much more active, and the final feedback stage would involve everyone.

Technique 15: Provocation by enthusiasts, critics, and beginners.

When you have had the beginnings of an idea for resolving a conflict (or indeed for any idea) but want to develop and clarify it, don't tidy it up too quickly. Seek out:

a) People who might get excited by it and might have ideas to add to it.

b) People who would give searching criticisms of it; don't let the criticisms get you down, but do listen to them carefully, make sure you understand them, and see what you can learn from them.

c) People who need to have it explained to them and have the patience to hear you through! Putting your ideas into very clear and simple terms will clarify your own thinking, and the "confused" or "naïve" questions such people ask are often very fundamental and very difficult to answer. If you take them seriously, you will learn a lot.

Technique 16: The 'back boiler' and the ideas notebook.

Keep your conflict problems and ideas simmering quietly in the back of your mind while you carry on your normal life, chatting to all sorts of people, reading, doing different things, etc. You will very often find that apparently unconnected remarks or events turn out either to be directly useful, or to trigger off useful trains of thought, when you least expect them. You do, of course, need to spend a lot of time pouring intensively over your problems, but you also need to spend time relaxing, enjoying yourself and "forgetting" about them - not only so that you get enough rest, but also to give "the back of your brain" time to get on with its own very special kind of intuitive thinking. Help the process along by always carrying a little notebook - even in the bath! Develop the habit of using it: inspiration is a bit like dreaming, if you don't make the effort to record it when it happens, it vanishes! Creative artists, scientists, and thinkers have always used notebooks in this way.

Technique 17: Brainstorming

This technique works best when you can get a small group (5 - 7) of people who work well together and are reasonably balanced for assertiveness, etc. They need a small room where they can be uninterrupted for several hours, and can be noisy if they want to be. They need lots of felt pens and surfaces to write on - e.g. whiteboards and big sheets of paper that can be stuck on the walls.

They need to be able to create an atmosphere which is playful, energetic, very permissive, supportive about risk taking in ideas and suggestions, but safe in other respects - i.e. no threats, criticism, pulling rank, put-downs, etc. If the atmosphere in the coop itself does not feel right, perhaps try meeting in someone's house, or even out of doors if you can work out how to handle the paper, etc.

Everyone is equal and everyone contributes though you may find it useful for one of you to act as "compère". During the idea-generating phases the compère encourages dramatic and outlandish developments (whilst still staying on the topic!), keeps the pace going, and gently discourages criticisms, etc. During evaluative phases, the compère helps to switch the focus back into a more sober approach. Start off by writing up the problem where everyone can see it in the form: "How to.......?"

1. Private imagination - this is usually a good way to start the session, though you can always go back to it if you feel you need a quiet phase. Each person works quietly on their own listing all the ideas they can that relate to the topic being worked on. Then
everyone pools their privately generated ideas in a single master list. It is best to pool
the ideas by using a "Round Robin" - go round the group repeatedly, each person
calling out one of their ideas each time it is their turn.

2. Group imagination - this often grows naturally out of the private imagination master
list created by the round robin. Everyone tries to build on everyone else's ideas either
logically, or by free association, wild fantasy, or in any other way. Anything goes -
sensible or silly, acceptable or outrageous, possible or impossible, nice or nasty,
healthy or unhealthy. The only rule is: never criticise or put down or reject any idea -
welcome everything and try to build on it. Every idea is written down either by the
compère, or by whoever can get hold of a pen and paper. Keep going while the
energy lasts, but stop before you get stale.

3. Evaluation phase. When you feel you have a good stock of ideas from the other two
modes, take a break - ideally a new days, but at least a tea-break! Then go through
the lists of ideas you produced and sort them into:

- ideas that seem useful now
- ideas that will be useful later
- ideas that might be useful, but need more thought
- wierdos i.e. bizarre ideas, jokes, etc.

The "wierdos" maybe useless as they stand, but they can be very useful as what de Bono calls
"intermediate impossibles". Try taking each wierdo totally seriously, and see if you could
transform it or develop it any way to become a directly useful idea. For instance, if you had
been working on a topic such as "sources of finance" and someone had suggested the wierdo
"try the man in the moon", that might lead to questions like: "Is there any part of the space
industry we could cash in on?", "Could we earn money over-night in any way?", "The moon
waxes and wanes in a monthly cycle - are there any regular cycles we could exploit?", "Why
a man- could women help us in any way?".

Technique 18: Nominal Group Technique.

This is a variant on brainstorming that will work even where there are quite large differences
of status, assertiveness, etc, and/or people don’t know one another very well. It is a way of
collecting together all the suggestions and viewpoints available from a group of people, with
everybody contributing equally, while minimising the effects of social pressure, status, non-
assertive personality, feeling inadequate, etc. It is particularly useful in the early stages of
dealing with a problem area when you need a much richer and deeper picture than you
already have; it is also useful for generating agendas for further discussion. It does need a
bit of advance preparation, but then should run very smoothly - its not as complicated as it
looks.

You could use it at a full meeting of the organisation, or for a group of people who come
together to look at a particular problem - perhaps because they are all affected by it, or all
very knowledgeable about it, etc. If there are more than about 7 people, divide up into sub-
groups of 4 - 7 - otherwise some of the stages will take too long. Each group will need a
secretary, some big sheets of A1 paper laid out in advance as in paragraph 4 below, providing
a total space for, say, 50 entries, blu-tac, felt-tip pens, and a suitable supply of cards - say 2"
x 8" (A4 sheets each cut across into 6 strips would do) or 3" x 5" Post-it pads - enough for,
say, 15 per participant. It can be done without cards, but is much quicker with them.

1. Make sure you all know, broadly speaking, what the problem is - don’t define it too
exactly at this stage - just indicate the problem area, or the main symptoms. It might
help to put a brief description of the problem up on the blackboard, or a big sheet of paper where everyone can see it.

2. Each person works on their own for, say, 5-15 minutes (depending on the topic) to write down on the cards (one item per card) different things about the problems that seem important - key features, key effects, key groups, key resources, important limitations and so on - perhaps 5 - 15 different items, no more than say five words in each. Everyone must write boldly, so that in the next step, everyone in the group will be able to read it from a distance.

3. Each sub-group now comes together as a group and the secretary helps each member in turn to stick their cards up in the "item" column of the chart below to form a single, consecutively numbered list, visible to the whole sub-group:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Star-rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 Initial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Writing up the list may well trigger off more suggestions from others. The secretary asks for additions and adds more cards to the list as required.

Go through the list item by item making sure that everyone understands what it means - the person who suggested it may say a few words (perhaps as it is being stuck up) and others may ask clarifying questions; however no-one is obliged to say anything - an item can be left anonymous if its author so wishes. If it becomes clear that one item is an exact duplicate of another, remove the duplicate - but if in doubt leave it in.

4. Each person is now given a fixed number of 'votes' - e.g. 10 - and working privately, they decide how they would like to distribute their ration of votes over the list of items. They can give up to, say, three votes to any one item, so they could for instance give ten items one vote each or one item three votes, three items two votes, and one item one vote.

5. Coming back together again as a sub-group when everyone is ready, each person reads out the items they classified as 3, 2, & 1 vote, and the secretary notes these ratings in column 3, so as to show the combined ratings for each item over the whole sub-group. Alternatively, everyone is given a sheet of ten stick-on stars, and distributes the stars over the list as they wish. Anyone who wishes to explain or ask questions about any rating can do so - though again the emphasis is on clarification only.

6. Since some people may wish to change their ratings in the light of other people's ratings, steps 4 and 5 are repeated - individuals write down privately what they now consider to be their own 3,2, & 1 vote items, and the secretary combines these revised ratings into column 4. Since the cards will soon be removed from the sheet, the secretary should mark the total rating on each card.
7. The cards are now arranged on a new sheet of paper so that those with the highest revised total ratings are at the top and those with the lowest at the bottom. Any major and consistent differences between individual revised listings and the overall listings should be discussed. Do not ignore such "non-average" responses or use the majority vote to overrule them, because they may well represent people with special information, special viewpoints, special needs, or independent judgements.

8. If you were working in several sub-groups, come together in full session and share the results of each sub-group's work.

5. NEGOTIATION

Negotiation is what happens when two (or more) sets of people want to resolve some difference or disagreement by talking it out, rather than ignoring it, postponing it, fudging it, or slogging it out in some cruder way. It might arise because of some internal disagreement within the organisation, or it might arise between the organisation and some external body - a bank, a supplier, a Local Authority department, an agency, etc. It maybe a "one-off" event, but it may also be quite routine - for instance some big Companies set up their Purchasing Departments as regular negotiating teams to try to negotiate good terms with all their suppliers.

The key thing about this kind of situation is that though the two sides are in some respects in conflict or in competition, each side also wants something from the other side, so in some respects they also have to cooperate - they depend on one another, but this interdependence also means that each side could damage the other. In some respects its a case of: "us versus them" - but in others it is a case of "us and them working creatively together".

So it is always a delicate balance. If you go too far one way, you degenerate into a slanging match in which both sides are defensive and/or aggressive, neither trusting the other. If you go too far the other way you end up giving in too easily, and one or both sides lose out. Really constructive negotiation depends on keeping the balance between competing with the other side, and yet also looking after them.

Checklist 5: Hints for negotiators

- It is usually better to negotiate as a small team rather than as a single individual - that way you can get a wider range of expertise, you can take different roles, you can get several views on what's going on, you can get moral support, and you can give one another feedback.

- Make sure that the setting is convenient and conducive to cooperation - try to avoid eyeball-to-eyeball seating arrangements - they may look good on TV, but they don't help negotiation. It's often a slight advantage to you if you can negotiate on your own home territory - 'home' matches are usually easier than 'away' ones.

- Make sure that everyone agrees about the way you are going to work - timetable, agenda, special arrangements, etc - and then stick by this unless everyone agrees to change it. Unexpected changes in procedures tend to make people nervous.

- Try to avoid conflicts of value - they tend to get very emotional. Concentrate on tangible differences, and early on in the proceedings try to establish at least some areas of agreement. For instance it would be very difficult to get Conservatives and Socialists to agree on the ideological basis of their support for Co-operatives - nevertheless it is relatively easy to get them to agree that certain specific forms of practical support should be given to small firms in the Co-operative sector.

- Though obviously you should have a clear idea in advance of the range of outcomes that your side would accept, it should be a range of possibilities, not a single take-it-
or-leave-it option, and it helps if your side gives you a certain amount of freedom of action - a negotiator who is very closely tied to his or her side's very fixed position has no scope for identifying creative solutions, and will be felt by the other side to be rigid and unconstructive. If possible, try to negotiate several issues at one setting. That way you have more scope for compromise - you can let go of one or two issues that do not matter too much to your side, in order to secure other issues that matter more to you.

- Listen carefully to the other side's point of view, and when they have finished, repeat the gist of it back to them until you and they are sure that you have understood it correctly. Don't jump in with instant counter-proposals, defensive justifications, long explanations, demands, etc. Do ask questions that establish common ground and avoid misunderstandings, and occasionally let people know how you are feeling: "I found that very helpful", "I'm beginning to feel a bit confused", "I enjoyed our discussion", etc. If people know that you really are listening and responding, then they often thaw and relax. Similarly when it is necessary to confront the other side, just state the position clearly and factually, and concentrate on the tangible issues - don't attack them, insult them, threaten them, give ideological lectures, irritate them with self-congratulation, stand on your dignity, etc. Do everything you can to keep the discussion at modest, tangible, reasonable, problem-solving level, and prevent it leading to defensiveness, or becoming personalised.

- Don't hurry things along too fast, or cut them short prematurely. Try to develop a feel for the natural ebb and flow of the negotiation, a sense of timing and pace, so that you can free things up if they get stuck, can anticipate trends and movements, and can allow each phase to consolidate before the next one. If things go silent, that's fine - don't feel that you have to rush in and say something. And be prepared for occasional crises - negotiations often alternate between bouts of tension and conflict, and quieter, more cooperative periods.

- If you do get a deadlock, don't panic, give up, or do something dramatic. Treat it as a natural pause. Make it very clear that you want to meet again, and then adjourn for a while - take a break.

Checklist 6: Some typical phases of a negotiation:

1. Establishing the bargaining range. This is often a kind of formal opening battle. Each side presents its own case and attacks the other's case, often with all the apparent signs of irreconcilable cleavage between the two sides (though great care is taken to keep the split at a formal rather than personal level - everyone goes through the motions of being very partisan even though individuals from each team are still perfectly capable of chatting over a cup of tea!). What is really going on here is an exchange of information, and a check on the balance of power that could be used later if necessary.

2. Reconnoitering the range: This is a much less formal and more cooperative stage, often involving quite a lot of person-to-person informal chats under the general smoke-screen of breast-beating and display. People explore possibilities, check out ideas, test reactions, etc. within the territory shown up by the opening battle.

3. Triggering off a decision-making crisis: This tends to be more formal and partisan again as one or both sides makes formal moves that tend to close off one another's options - this can be quite a risky and emotive stage, with a fair amount of tension and conflict. If it works it forces both sides further down the road towards a settlement.

4. Conducting the agreement: Once an agreement is recognised as such, there is usually a certain amount of formal razzamatazz, though behind this would be a lot of work on the practical details of how to implement it, with both sides now working together as a single problem-solving team.
Technique 19: Resolving one-to-one conflicts within the organisation.

This is a simple and robust method for helping individuals within the co-op to negotiate a resolution to long-standing differences.

1. Someone agrees to act as convener for the exercise. The convener needs to be a respected but neutral person, capable of helping the opponents focus on the task in hand.

2. Before they meet, each of the two opponents is asked to write out four lists, headed:
   a) the things I have valued in the ways we have worked together.
   b) the things I have disliked in the ways we have worked together.
   c) the things I think you value in the way we have worked together.
   d) the things I think you dislike in the ways we have worked together.

3. A meeting is set up between them. The convener tells each to read out his or her first list ("things I have valued...") to the other. These lists are then discussed so as to ensure that each understands clearly what the other means. The convener discourages any talk not specifically directed towards each understanding the others point. Then each reads their second list ("things I have disliked...") to one another, and discuss them in the same way, and finally each reads the third and fourth lists together to one another, followed by a third round of discussion.

4. Each then outlines any changes that would help to improve the relationship, and how they would work together to bring these things about.

5. They then draw up a list of residual items that they still disagree on, and decide whether to leave them for the time being, or else how to deal with them.

6. The convener follows up any agreements later on, to see if they are being carried out.

Technique 20: Negotiating a conflict between two groups within the organisation.

This very simple negotiating technique is based on two principles:

- Conflicts over larger issues are often tangled up with lesser conflicts, different expectations about the likely effects of different outcomes, and various sorts of emotional reactions. This halo of minor confusions makes the central conflict much harder to resolve.

- Groups in conflict tend to polarise by focussing more on their differences than their agreements. Spelling out the areas of agreement helps to correct this, and makes realistic resolution easier.

So this technique tries to make the central issues easier to get at and think about by first clarifying, and if possible resolving, the fringe issues. It is described here as a routine (and therefore familiar) procedure for helping pairs of small groups from within the cooperative who disagree with one another - say 3 - 8 people in each group. But the general approach is basic to many kinds of conflict negotiation, and you could adapt it for helping to resolve clashes between individuals, for negotiations with outside bodies, and so on.

1. If both groups already have members that are very experienced in this technique, they might be able to work without a convenor - but normally it would help to have someone who is familiar with the method, is not party to the dispute, and is
acceptable to both sides, as a convenor to look after the room arrangements, remind everyone of the procedure, and look after timing, refreshment, etc. If one or both of the groups are not experienced in the technique, and/or feel particularly vulnerable, a neutral convenor is probably essential. The session could well take 3 hours or so, and needs a large, quiet, room, big enough for the two groups to meet privately in parallel. Make sure there are plenty of comfortable chairs, and avoid tables - they tend to make people more formal and less open. Each person will need a pen and paper, and you will need 3 sets (2 groups and the full group) of large writing surfaces (blackboard and chalk, A1 paper and felt tip pens, etc). It will save some time, and reduce the possibility of confusion, if you can provide enough pad-sized (e.g. A4) copies of the response listing below, for each individual, and a few large copies (e.g. A1) for each group and the convenor.

2. Each person works privately on their own for 15 minutes to complete the following response listing:

a) If our side won this conflict the most important things we would gain are, in order of priority (1 is the most important):

1: __________________________
2: __________________________
3: __________________________
4: __________________________
5: __________________________

b) If we lost the conflict, the most important things we would lose are, in order of priority (1 is the most important)

1: __________________________
2: __________________________
3: __________________________
4: __________________________
5: __________________________

3. Everyone assembles into the two groups representing the opposite sides of the conflict. They spend about 30 minutes in their separate groups pooling their individual lists of expected gains and losses, and using this to fill a large (A1 or blackboard sized) version of the response listing on behalf of their group. They should aim for full consensus about this, rather than majority voting.

4. The two groups then come together, bringing their group listings. The convenor (or one of the participants) converts the two listings into a single large chart made out like this:
Point out that the "losses" section is upside down, so as to bring all the "priority 5" items together.

5. The members of the two groups now try to see how many of their differences they can resolve, concentrating to start with on the lowest priority expected gains and losses (first deal with 5, then 4, etc.). As issues are resolved, the convenor identifies the growing area of agreement on the chart.

6. While this progressively developing agreement may eventually eliminate even the "level 1" conflicts of interest, obviously there will be occasions when a number of the solid issues remain. However if things have gone well, each side will now understand much better what is at stake for the other side, and the problem will now be much less messy; that is probably enough for one session.

7. Close down with a discussion of what to do next, including:

- how to follow up aspects that have been resolved
- how to proceed with still unresolved aspects - e.g. appointment of representatives to continue the negotiations later, formation of a problem-solving group to search for further options, referring it to a meeting of the whole organisation, etc. etc.

6. ON SUPPORT, ENJOYMENT, AND GOOD COMPANY.

It may seem a bit of a contradiction to be serious about pleasure, but beyond the obvious fact that enjoyment is what makes life worth living (!) it serves a number of rather important functions - so important that if you postpone it too long, and ignore it too often, you may start building up very unenjoyable problems. Here are some of the serious advantages of pleasure:
Checklist 7: The serious advantages of pleasure

1. *Everybody* needs breaks and changes of mood - not just to recuperate physically, and recharge mentally, but also to give some time for all those things that "sit at the back of your mind" and need time to sort themselves out.

2. When people are taking additional risks, they need additional supports - and in a new organisation very many people will be taking a lot of psychological, financial, and other risks, doing all sorts of things they have never done before - so there is also a great deal of support needed - affectionate respect, understanding, listening and direct help beforehand; recognition, thanks and congratulations afterwards. Even if something goes wrong, pleasure and affectionate laughter are wonderful restoratives.

3. Enjoyment usually implies variety, and laughter often happens when apparently unconnected ideas connect unexpectedly. Variety and unexpected connections are also key features of creativity. An element of earnest workaholic seriousness may be essential to give you the strength to keep going, but unless you break out of it from time to time it may also give a one-track vision that makes you unable to manoeuvre. Flexibility often needs lightness of touch, as well as strength.

4. In the opening "honeymoon" weeks and months when you have just set up your organisation, novelty and idealism may be a very important part of what carries people along. But the novelty value can wane, and many people do not find theoretical idealism enough to sustain them - they want a reasonably rewarding life now, not as a vague future promise or possibility. So as the months go by more and more people will probably need to get the ordinary human pleasures out of the organisation - particularly if pay and security are not very good. This will be even more important when the organisation has been in existence long enough for it to have a "second generation" of members who were not around when the organisation was set up.

5. It is important to "go where the energy is". The feeling of pleasure and interest is the body's way of signalling that it is "connecting" to what is going on, and without that "connection" you will not get very far in any collective action. So signs of "un-pleasure" are very important. Boredom, withdrawal and restlessness signal that people are not "connecting"; physiological signs like discomfort or hunger, or active emotions like anger, fear, anxiety, etc. signal that practical agendas are being overridden by other priorities. So:

- If strong feelings are around, the first priority is to let people express them and deal with them - see the notes on feedback in Section 3. Sometimes that really cannot be done "now"; in such cases provide an opportunity for it very soon. Trying to force through a fixed agenda against strong feelings is a recipe for disaster. Strong feelings out in the open may seem a bit alarming, but they are almost always much less damaging that way than if you sit on them. The fear of fear or anger is often much more damaging than the fear or anger itself.

- If people are restless, withdrawn, etc. then they need an appropriate break.

- If they are bored, they need stimulation - perhaps a break, a change of topic, a bit of humour, a "run around the block" or even a quick energising game (see below). However if the boredom is tinged with resentment or anxiety, it may be a signal of emotional pressure that needs to be dealt with in a more positive way.

- Try also to be sensitive about the natural rhythms of activity - respect, and allow time for, the little rituals that all groups of people evolve - greeting one another, the little preliminary chat about nothing in particular, etc. Don't start
before people feel ready to start; give time for items to "finish" - don't rush into the next agenda item while people are still mulling over the outcome of the previous one; don't try to overload a meeting - particularly if it contains emotionally charged items. Adjusting and assimilating take time and if you overload people they just "go blank" or feel hassled.

All these points do not of course mean that meetings should not have carefully planned agendas, or that every transient emotion or whim should be given top priority over the work of the team. It does mean that you should have a great deal of respect for both the constructive and destructive potential of underlying personal and group emotions, so that agendas have to be planned not only in terms of the business of the meeting, but also to anticipate its likely emotions and interests, and create a format that allows for them; in the meeting itself you must be sensitive to the moment by moment feelings of the group, and be willing to adapt and adjust as appropriate, occasionally even to the extent of totally reconstructing the meeting. Emotional pressures are potentially the most powerful force in any meeting, and always have the capacity to make it or break it.

6. Finally, enjoyment is a wonderful precaution against bitter disillusion. For example, anyone who tries to set up a cooperative is running two kinds of risk - on the one hand like any small business there is inevitably a significant risk of practical business failure. In addition you are also putting your beliefs and ideals on the line in what is still a relatively experimental kind of organisation that could miscarry. Failures can hurt - particularly to the person who feels that they have sacrificed a great deal, and got very little out of it. Disillusion can even turn people to fight against what they once believed in. The answer is to avoid the kinds of sacrifices that drive people to their limits. Make sure that everyone does enjoy the experience of setting up and running a new organisation and is enriched by it as they go along. Then, if in spite of all your efforts a failure does happen, though it will still hurt, at least you will not turn on yourselves destructively, because there will be many good times to remember and you will take away good friendships and a sense of having been enriched by the experience and quite possibly a realistic determination to try again.

Technique 21: Gifts of happiness

There are all sorts of ways in which a group can create enjoyment either collectively, or for individuals. Many of them are very obvious and traditional:

- remembering one another's birthdays as special occasions
- Christmas parties, summer outings, and other entertainments
- spending time together in the evenings
- decorating the work area to make it pleasanter or more fun to be in
- arranging jobs so that people can work and socialise at the same time.

Some of these will be for group/team members only, some could involve friends and families as well. Some would be paid for by a "whip round" - others might be subsidised by the organisation, or at least might use the organisation's bulk buying power (e.g. party rates for travel).

Technique 22: Games with a purpose

While traditional, largely escapist, ways of collective enjoyment such as parties are very important, they do have the limitation that they don't really engage with detailed needs and life of the organisation - they are all "diversions". However there are things you can do that are not just enjoyable, but that actually help the process of the organisation directly.
For instance, suppose people at a meeting are getting bored and energy is low, you could just take a tea-break. But tea-breaks take at least a quarter of an hour, they don't really energise people very well, and many people spend the 15 minutes doing nothing very constructive. An alternative, if people are uninhibited enough to try it, is to have a brief round of a "game". Here is one example, adapted from a well-known children's game:

1. Form a circle if you are not already in one.

2. Everyone starts clapping to a regular beat.

3. Suppose that Charlie Brown, Mary Ann, and Harry Bloggs are 3 members of the group. Then the pattern of the game goes like this:
   - Charlie B: Zing, Zing, Zing and a one two three: Mary Ann
   - Mary A: "Who, me?"
   - Charlie B: "Yes, you!"
   - Mary A: "Not me!"
   - Charlie B: "Then who?"
   - Mary A: "Zing, Zing, Zing and a one two three Harry Bloggs!"
   - Harry B: "Who me?"

   and so on. Each person picking somebody else. Make sure that everyone gets picked at least once. Speed it up.

The benefits of a game like this over a conventional tea-break are:

- It energises people better because of the rhythms
- It is very quick
- 2-3 minutes is plenty
- It creates a lot of interactions and tends to improve the sense of togetherness.
- It gives people a chance to check out everyone's names - even in quite a small group people often do not know one another's names with complete confidence.
- Even shy people get involved.

However, many groups find it hard to relax enough to enjoy "children's games" in a work setting, so you always need to be sensitive to whether any particular group is likely to be receptive to such an idea; you may also be able to devise more acceptable "games" such as the teasing and banter that often happen spontaneously amongst people who get on well together. The important thing is to recognise the practical value of such games, and to capitalise on it.

**Technique 23: Good news, bad news**

Another very simple game is "good news, bad news" or "fortunately, unfortunately".

1. Someone starts by saying: "A bit of *good* news this week was....."
2. The next person says: "a bit of bad news this week was...."

3. The next person says: "a bit of good news this week was...."

And so on round the group.

Or you can tell a story alternating between "fortunately....", "but unfortunately.....", "however fortunately....." and so on. You can either play it purely for fantasy and laughs, in which case it is probably best used as an entertainment on a social occasion - perhaps in the pub of an evening, or on a coach trip. However it can also be used more seriously if the "good" or "bad" news relates to the individual or to the organisation - in this mode it could be used as a way of "warming up" the start of a meeting with mixture of genuine sharing and more lighthearted contributions.

It is a game that involves everyone, energises people in a gentle way, creates a sense of togetherness, encourages sharing of experiences, stimulates imagination, and often allows people to joke about taboo subjects in an acceptable way.

Technique 24: Greetings cards

Often, when people feel they have worked particularly closely and well together, there is a need for some simple way of both celebrating, and making positive gestures to one another.

You could just go out for a drink in a pub together, or sing: "For we are jolly good fellows"! However these are rather undifferentiated ways of doing things. Here is another way:

Write everyone’s name on a bit of paper, shuffle them. Each person picks one out at random. Then each person designs a simple greetings card for the person picked out, containing a compliment or a bit of positive feedback to suit the person ("I like the way you......", "I felt pleased when you......", etc.) Give them the card. A longer and more thought provoking version of this is for each person to write a "card" for every other member of the group, so that each person receives a complete set of compliments.

Technique 25: Emblems, drawings, and graffiti

Particularly early on but also from time to time throughout the life of the organisation, it will usually need to think a lot about what its real identity is: "What sort of a group are we, really?" Lighthearted exercises can often touch remarkably deep levels of such a question.

For instance, when people need a break during heavy-weight long-term planning discussions, take time off to try to design a lighthearted heraldic coat of arms for the organisation. Or use material cut from old magazines to make a large collective collage or mural depicting the organisation. Or draw a strip cartoon depicting a series of steps in the organisation's life. A more subversive variant of this is to have a "graffiti" board somewhere in the organisation and encourage people to use it - though its probably best to clean it at regular intervals since people may want to make aggressive scrawls from time to time which they don’t necessarily want to live with forever after! An "in-house cabaret" at the Christmas party can serve the same sort of function.

These symbolic methods will, of course, rapidly fall into disrepute if there is no practical result from them and they are just used for "getting things out of your system"; find ways of discussing what emerges, of discussing people's reactions, and of checking out how important or unimportant the features revealed are.y

7. TRAINING WORKSHOPS AND FURTHER READING

In choosing the exercises and techniques to include in these notes, I have limited myself to including only those which could be described briefly, required very little by way of special facilities or materials, and could be run by a organisation as part of its normal routine without assistance. However organisations that find these ways of working useful may feel that they
would like to take on some of the more complex techniques, and development workers who are concerned more with setting up special training workshops, may not want to be limited in this way.

The set of books from which I have adapted quite a few of these exercises are one of the classic resources for this type of work and contain several hundred different techniques and exercises, 30-40 of which look as if they could be adapted for use for training democratically run organisations or for routine use under some circumstances:


"The Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators (17 volumes from 1972-1988)."

These two sets of books are edited by J. William Pfeiffer and John E. Jones, University Associates, and are distributed in the U.K. by University Associates International Ltd., Challenge House, 45-47 Victoria Street, Mansfield, Notts, NG18 5SU

Sadly, they are very expensive but Business Schools and Departments of Management or of Organisation Studies in Universities, Polytechnics, etc. may have sets in their libraries which you might be able to use.